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## Prof. Marcus Receives First Woman of SUNY Buffalo Law Award

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Kathryn Hartnett '15, Andrea D. Lughio '15, Kristen Flick '15, Professor Isabel Marcus, Nadeen Bawab '15 and Anna McCarthy '15

# Prof. Marcus receives first Woman of SUNY Buffalo Law Award

*A pioneer in advocating for women's and civil rights*

By **MARCENE ROBINSON**

**A**t 12 years old, Isabel Marcus knew she wanted to become a rabbi. However, when Marcus revealed her ambitions to her rabbi, she was informed that the closest a girl could come to the position is reb-betzin, or the rabbi's wife. To her horror, Marcus' father agreed.

"That's the moment I became a fem-

inist," says Marcus, now a professor at SUNY Buffalo Law School. "I realized by the time I finished high school that women and girls were second-class citizens."

Six decades later, Marcus stood before a crowd of lawyers and judges, and students, faculty and staff from the Law School. After a career of advocating for women's and civil rights, Marcus was honored with the first Woman of SUNY Buffalo Law Award from the Women of

SUNY Buffalo Law (WSBL), a student organization for the professional and educational advancement of female law students.

"I've been honored by UB and in other countries, but that this award came from the students, and that it is the first one is very moving," said Marcus.

WSBL was launched in fall 2014 to provide female law students with opportunities to connect with practicing women attorneys and to create avenues to impact state and local policy-making.

"We want to honor someone who embodies our mission statement," said Anna McCarthy, WSBL co-president. "Dr. Marcus has been very supportive of our group, has been at the Law School

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for more than 30 years and has had an impressive career."

The ceremony was held March 26 at the Jacobs Executive Development Center at the Butler House in Buffalo.

Among those in attendance were Erie County Family Court Judge Lisa Rodwin '85, attorneys from Hodgson Russ and Hurwitz & Fine, and Law School interim Dean James A. Gardner.

"She's a real pioneer in her field," said Gardner. "She's been doing amazing work for a long time; important work that needs to be done that no one else is doing. She's invented this enterprise of training women's rights advocates in parts of the world where they don't exist. It's a lifetime's work that deserves recognition."

Marcus detailed much of her early career in her award speech, "Why Feminism Matters and What Is to Be Done," which was a collection of stories that bounced between humor and severity to explain how feminism changed her life.

She illustrated the harsh realities of growing up in a Jewish family that emigrated from Poland, her early – and somewhat unsuccessful – run for high school political office, and how she wanted to disappear when she brought a boyfriend home for the first time and her parents pounced on the opportunity to showcase her awards and photos for public oratory and debate contests.

Marcus also shared her struggles with the University of California, Berkeley, to add a course in the political science department that focused on women in politics, and her experience in organizing the first sex discrimination class-action case against a major public university, a lawsuit she brought to implement affirmative action programs.

Before ending her speech, Marcus told of a University of Texas doctoral candidate who borrowed her copy of Jürgen Habermas' *Legitimation Crisis*. Upon finding "commie" ideologies inside, he shredded the book with guns.

Out of consideration, the student returned the destroyed book with a new copy to replace it. Marcus held on to the tattered copy – a memento from her time teaching in Texas – and was met with laughter when she displayed it



Professor Marcus addresses the crowd at the Butler House in Buffalo.



*"I've been honored by the University and in other countries, but that this award came from the students, and that it is the first one, is very moving."*

– Professor Isabel Marcus

to the crowd.

Each story was underlined by her challenging patriarchy by demanding substantive and not merely formal equality for all women.

"We need to be aware of our context and to understand history," says Marcus, who earned a J.D., an M.A. in African studies and Ph.D. in political science from UC Berkeley. "The combination of going down South and living in Berkeley changed my life. I saw the darkest, cruelest sides of America. You couldn't see America in the same way."

Marcus joined SUNY Buffalo Law School in 1982. Her research focuses on family law, domestic violence and international women's rights. She has lectured extensively at Eastern European and Asian universities, and established an International Visiting Scholarship for women's rights lawyers from Eastern Europe to attend SUNY Buffalo Law.

Marcus is also the founder of the UB Institute for Research and Education on Women and Gender, or Gender Institute, and served as chair of the Department of Women's Studies from 1997 to 2002.